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ON THE COVER
Low-carb living
Spicy root patties from The Diabetes Weight-Loss Plan by Katie Caldesi – see pages 8&9
Photography: Maja Smend/PA

WINNERS
Babs Bartle, of Bath; Christina Trim, of Gillingham in Dorset; and John Cameron, of Torpoint in Cornwall have each won a copy of the book Frome In 50 Buildings by Alastair MacLeay

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Big Interview

'My sculptures are very alive to me'

Beth Carter's life-size bronze sculptures – half-human, half-animal – offer a glimpse of a dream-like world. The West Country artist tells **BEE BAILEY** about Pablo Picasso, her soulful studio, and the painful reason why she gifted tiny books to her minotaurs

WHEN Beth Carter stood in a small French town and cried at the sight of her own sculpture, nobody would have anticipated her reaction.

She had been asked to send several pieces for an exhibition to mark the 50th anniversary of Pablo Picasso's death and was invited to attend the opening. Her works were displayed at the Musée d'Art Classique in Mougins and the Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Vie, next door to the villa where the artist lived and died. Positioned on the wall behind one of her bronze minotaurs, she saw Picasso's *Dying Minotaur*.

Like Beth, the artist had been fascinated by the mythical creature. But out of all of his thousands of works, it was this etching that meant the world to Beth.

"It's a simple line drawing of a dying minotaur and behind him is a wall and there's all these women's faces peeking over the wall. One of the women has her hand reaching toward the minotaur," she says.

"I always feel like that girl, that's me reaching towards the minotaur. It epitomises almost everything I feel about the minotaur. When I saw Picasso's original etching behind my piece, I wept. It was beyond what I could ever have hoped for."

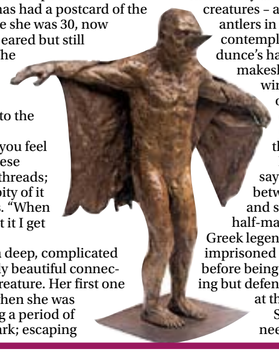
Beth, 55, has had a postcard of the etching since she was 30, now slightly dog-eared but still cherished. The curators had no idea she had an attachment to the artwork.

"It makes you feel there's all these connecting threads; the serendipity of it all," she says. "When I think about it I get shivers."

Beth has a deep, complicated and strangely beautiful connection to the creature. Her first one was made when she was experiencing a period of light after dark; escaping the backdrop of blossom and trees full of song birds.



Beth Carter's reading minotaurs were a subconscious response to hearing that her dad didn't ever have a book as a child. Below, two more of Beth's bronze figures



"They come past and blink and think, 'Oh my god, what is that creature?' Some dogs really investigate what I'm doing. I like it when dogs react because I think [the minotaur] must have some kind of life for them to respond."

At the Milwyn Art Foundry, near Hampton Court, they metamorphose. Crafted from clay in Beth's studio, they are moulded in silicon, made into a hollow wax, and cast in bronze before patination. It's an ancient process, skilfully executed, 'full of fire and heavy metal,' with the bronze poured from a huge crucible.

"The stage I see the bronze at first is when it's completely covered in ceramic shell," Beth says. "They chip all that off, so you see the bronze revealed. There he is in metal. The transformation from the soft clay, that's completely vulnerable, into this permanent metal form, is like alchemy. It exists in its own world now. I've made it and it's gone forth into the world."

Many people feel a warmth towards the sculptures even before they understand the significance of Beth's childhood memories and her father's traumatic upbringing.

Beth was living in New York when her dad – an artist carving and constructing things from stone and marble in the yard behind their home – died suddenly in 2012. She was working towards a solo show and life was good.

"It was the best year of my life and then the worst thing happened," she says.

"As a kid I was always the one who was out in his workshop, making stuff in the corner and watching him. I'm probably an artist because he was an artist. I never thought I would do anything else."

Despite their bond, living with him could be tough. He had bipolar and depression and struggled with anger. His own father had been a violent, alcoholic slaughterman, who regularly beat Beth's dad and his five brothers.

university in Sunderland, where she was miserable, for a placement in Cyprus. It was there, 25 years ago, that she immersed herself in Greek mythology and her first life-size minotaur sculpture was born.

She has been making them ever since. They and her other creatures – a human form with antlers in a defensive pose, a contemplative figure in a dunce's hat, a birdman with a makeshift beak and cloth wings – stir up feelings of tenderness, a desire to care for them and keep them safe.

Each one, Beth says, has a duality between vulnerability and strength, like the half-man, half-bull of Greek legend who was imprisoned in a labyrinth before being killed, a frightening but defenceless creature left at the mercy of others.

She doesn't fight the need to produce such pieces, getting a surge of energy when the 'library' of ideas in her head throws up something she's driven to create at her studio on the outskirts of Bath.

After growing up in Calne, Wiltshire, and 25 years living and working in Bristol, Beth and her husband have moved to the countryside, not far from the city. Her studio is in a Victorian school house, all high ceilings, wooden floors and big bright windows.

"It's got a real soul to it," she says.

"It's got a chapel feel because of the light and the windows – it's absolutely heavenly, it really is."

Sometimes she works outside and dog walkers stop to say 'hello,' drawn towards the mysterious minotaurs that are being created against





Beth Carter's bronze minotaur sits in front of Picasso's Dying Minotaur in Mougins, France, which has long been a significant work of art for Beth. Photos: Beth Carter

Only after Beth had built up a body of work over 10 years did she realise the relationship between the minotaurs and her father.

"My dad was a complicated character," she says. "He would never be violent to us but he would smash things up. He was brooding and would withdraw from the family. But when he wasn't like that, he was absolutely wonderful and fun-loving; he had different sides to his personality.

"The minotaur in the myth is very lonely, very isolated, very brooding. He's a sort of monster and people are frightened of him. On a basic level, as a child, that was what was happening to me. As much as I adored my dad, he was frightening. After therapy my dad became much softer and less angry, he mellowed. He was extremely sensitive and intelligent and all these things I hadn't seen as a child.



Beth in her studio in the countryside near Bath



Reunited with her crouching minotaur in the Chapelle Notre Dame De Vie; below, the imposing Giant Standing Minotaur II, cast in iron resin

> All the good things that have happened to me, all the amazing things I have been able to be a part of, is because of the minotaurs
>
> **Beth Carter**

"All of that is encompassed in the minotaur; all of those paradoxes. In the myth, he was born into these circumstances and was a victim of those circumstances, he was locked away in his labyrinth and treated brutally – all of that ties in with my dad's story."



When Beth is sculpting, she often gets close to the emotions she feels about her father's childhood, and her own, but it's never morbid.

"It's being OK with the sadness; it's just part of the spectrum of things we feel. It's not wallowing in it or self-pitying, it's just feeling it," she says. "And, actually, I'm very happy most of the time, even though I've had sad periods in my life. I wish all the stuff hadn't happened. But I feel shaped by it, I feel more resilient. I have been lucky enough to get through it."

It was her desire to give her minotaurs tiny books to read that finally made Beth understand their significance. She realised a memory buried in her mind was coming out in her work, a conversation when her dad told her he had never had a book as a child.

"Your subconscious stores all this stuff," she says.

"Being an artist, you allow it all to bubble up. If you can contain it all, and shape it into something that feels authentic and real and honest, that's what people connect with."

It comforts her to hear that her work communicates the love she pours into it; it makes the hairs on her arms stand on end.

"For me, it is an absolute revelation that art can do that and I am still gob-smacked by its power," she says.

One buyer wrote to Beth to say she hadn't wanted to leave her small minotaur behind when she was going away. So she put him in the front seat of her car, put a seatbelt around him, and took him home for Christmas with her parents.

Neither Beth, nor anyone who has bonded with her sculptures, would be surprised to hear that.

"I feel really close to [my sculptures]. I know them. I care about them deeply," she says.

"They are all over my studio. When I turn the light off it's, 'Good night everyone.' They are very alive to me."

Today, her bronze friends live all over the world. Soon many more of them will take their place in the south of France.

After the Picasso exhibition, Beth was invited back to Mougins to be artist in residence for 2026. The Mougins Monumental will see her exhibit between 20 and 30 life-sized pieces – flying figures, minotaurs and more – around the town for a year.

Like other important moments in her life, the opportunity wouldn't have happened without her connection to the minotaur.

"Before I did the speech [at the Mougins exhibition launch] I came across this thing Picasso said, which was, if he drew a line of all the places he had been in his life, it would make the shape of a minotaur.

"It struck me like a bolt of lightning. That is what my life feels like. All the good things that have happened to me, all the amazing things I have been able to be a part of, is because of the minotaurs."

■ Visit bethcarter.co.uk or follow @bethcarterartist on Instagram. Beth's work can be seen at galleries including Beaux Arts, York Street, Bath.